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ABSTRACT

Sexist language provides a useful diagnostic symptom of how pervasively women's invisibility and degradation are manifested in modern society. In analyzing instances of sexist language usage, three types of factors may be considered: (1) linguistic facts related to the sexist usage: (2) cognitive factors--attitudes, values, perceptions--behind the sexist usage: and (3) political factors, involving identification of the desired change and the tactics for achieving it. The use of linguistic taboos demonstrates the nature of sexist language and its function in a sexist society. Such emotionally charged words as "fuck" and "come" refer to the male's role in the sex act, and such violent metaphors for sex as "to bang" and "to plow" illustrate the way sex and violence are related in a sexist society. If women refrain from using such emotionally charged words, they legitimate men's sole privilege to use them: if they use them, they thereby participate in their own degradation. The ultimate resolution of the dilemma faced by modern women striving for a more egalitarian society presumably presupposes radical change--political, social, and linguistic. (GT)

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SEXIST LANGUAGE AND THE COMPETENCE/PERFORMANCE DISTINCTION

by Saporta, Sol

In a number of places various scholars, among them Noam Chomsky, have tried to distinguish two types of phenomena. On the one hand, are phenomena of theoretical interest, that is of interest primarily insofar as they bear on interesting theories. So, for example, the question of whether or not there is a point of light at the bottom of a mine shaft (Chomsky's example) is of interest only to the extent that it helps evaluate competing theories of light. Similarly, the linguistic examples cited in the literature are of interest insofar as they help articulate grammatical theories. It is presumably failure to make this distinction that renders vacuous the claims of those critics who are dismayed that linguistics seems to focus on sentences like The man hit the ball and The ball was hit by the man and ignores Macbeth and Othello.

These latter, then, are examples of phenomena which have intrinsic, and inherent human, interest. Thus, the significance of a play or novel or how to build a just society command our attention regardless of the likelihood of providing any theoretical explanation.

I find this distinction illuminating and to a certain extent a useful first approximation to characterizing the difference between the sciences and the humanities; incidentally, the distinction helps account for the sterility of most social sciences, which in a sense, fall between two schools, by obscuring the inherent human worth of their subject matter by theoretical pretentions which are doomed to fail.

Obviously, the two categories are neither mutually exclusive, nor exhaustive. One can imagine phenomena which have both theoretical and humanistic interest, and there are countless observations which presumably have neither.

Studies on sexist language, have, I suspect, suffered precisely because they have been done in large part by scholars with training, interest and ambitions in theoretical linguistics, when in fact the phenomena bear only marginally on current linguistic theory. However, sexist language does seem to provide a useful diagnostic symptom of how pervasively women's invisibility and degradation are manifested in our society.

In short, I would like to distinguish three aspects of sexist language, which I will refer to as linguistic, cognitive and political.

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Consider, then, a rather typical example. A friend submitted an article to a scholarly journal, in which all her references to Scott, Thackeray, and Austen were edited to read Scott, Thackeray, and Jane Austen.

First, what are the linguistic facts? Clearly, there is no rule of grammar that requires that women be referred to by their first name. (Some linguists might argue, that the phenomenon is grammatical, and that the inability to formulate a grammatical rule to account for it reveals a critical gap in grammatical theory. This involves a change in the definition of grammar, and hence of grammatical theory). The fact is that this is not a question of dialect difference in any conventional sense of that term. Presumably, what is going on here is a difference in performance, not competence, a systematic difference, perhaps, but a difference in performance nevertheless. Indeed, one can even try to approximate a formulation of the editor's rule. As speaker, the rule might be something like never refer to a woman by her last name alone'. As a hearer, the rule might be 'Interpret a last name alone as referring to a man'. But clearly, such generalizations are rules of usage, not rules of grammar.

But the second question is, what non-linguistic facts if any can be inferred from the linguistic facts? These are what I would call cognitive questions, that is, questions about attitudes, values, perceptions, etc. If asked, the editor might explain his linguistic preference in terms of politeness or courtesy. Now, there is nothing inherently sexist about courtesy, and conversely nothing particularly egalitarian about rudeness, but obviously the question then becomes why is politeness so assymetrical. The proper term then might be, not <u>courtesy</u>, but <u>chivalry</u> or <u>gallantry</u>, that is, the special kind of courtesy which a privileged class manifests to others. Gallantry then cannot exist in a genuinely egalitarian society. So, the linguistic usage here is merely one manifestation of the same attitude which results in holding doors, lighting cigarettes, etc.

But, now, even granting the above, the political strategy is far from obvious. By <u>political</u> here I mean merely identifying the desired change and the tactics for achieving that change. Specifically what, if any, changes in attitude follow from changes in linguistic rules and usage? The editor presumably might have been persuaded to leave references to Austen unchanged. Would one then be justified in concluding that gallantry in this case had been replaced by egalitarianism, or indeed that any change at all had been effected? Presumably not. Another limitation of much work on sexist language is that it seems to assert some simple causal connection between language and perception. The evidence is far from conclusive, and in spite of heated lengthy debate, it is not always clear precisely what claims are being made about the relationship of language, both competence and performance, to values, attitudes, etc. In short, though good linguitics does not insure good politics, bad linguistics, will virtually guarantee poor politics. So, for example the misplaced indignation

at the word history usually results in the trivialization of the issue of sexist language.

Less obviously, but I believe equally futile are debates about whether it is politically correct to refer to a woman as a poet or poetess. The fact is that whereas in English either is possible, a man can be referred to as a poet only, not a poetess. The assymetry is in the system, and persists regardless of any pattern of usage. A related, unanswered question, of course, is how changes in usage may or may not result in changes in the system.

One critical area for anyone interested in the nature of sexist language and its function in a sexist society is the use of linguistic taboos. One of the privileges men enjoy in this society is greater latitude in the use of emotionally charged language. Presumably, this is one additional manifestation of the general demand on women to adhere to conditions of propriety. It has become fashionable for some contemporary men and women to argue that in their community such words are used by all persons and hence have lost their sexist connotations. I think this refulects both a simplistic view of semantics and semantic change, as well as of sexual politics. Constant and repeated use is not a sufficient condition for 'defusing' words of their emotional connotation, or their sexist bias. Breaking a taboo is not the same as eliminating it.

Thus, even an unsophisticated analysis of a word like fuck suggests that one semantic component is the feature of penetration, current usage with female nouns and pronouns as subjects notwithstanding. Anyone can persuade themselves by formulating the appropriate expression to refer, for example to anal intercourse. Similarly, the noun come refers to semen, and although this semantic feature can be suspended, it nevertheless illustrates the sexist assymetry of the word, even when used as a verb; only men can be said, for example, 'to come all over the sofa'.

One last example to illustrate the interrelation of language, cognition and political power is the connection of words for sex and violence. Whether and to what extent sex and violence are related is presumably a physiological and psychological question of some complexity. I don't happen to share the commonly held view, that perceiving such a connection is an irrational and perverted sympton of a puritanical society. But, in any case, the linguistic evidence does suggest the particular way in which sex and violence are related in a sexist society. Thus, in a novel of a few years ago, the author points out that the expression to do the job on someone is used in certain circles to mean either to kill someone or to have sex. What the author ignores is that only men can 'do the job on someone'. Similarly for other violent metaphors for sex like to bang or to plow. Football players, anticipating sex, refer to going home to punish the old lady. Equating sex and violence is not necessarily sexist, but the assymetrical nature of that equation clearly is.

Obviously, the issues here are not merely linguistic. Can there be erotic, non-sexist language in a sexist society? I suspect not. Modern women, striving towards a more egalitarian society are faced with a classical double-bind. Either they refrain from using emotionally charged words, thereby legitimizing men's privilege, or they choose to use the words, and thereby participate in their own degradation. The ultimate resolution of that dilemma presumably presupposes radical change, political, social and linguistic.